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# What's Stalling Learning? Using a Formative Assessment Tool to Address Critical Incidents in Class

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## **Keywords**

Critical Incident Questionnaire, Reflection, Stasis, Writing, Formative assessment, Schön

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### Abstract

We report on the use of Brookfield's (1995) formative assessment tool, the "Critical Incident Questionnaire" (CIQ) to help students and teachers identify and discuss key factors affecting learning. We offer insight into two major areas: 1) testing and adapting the existing tool to improve teaching and learning and 2) identifying moments of potentially productive tension between the learner and the learning process—moments that, once named, we can address more directly. We call these moments *stasis points*. Our research questions were: "Based on insights emerging from regular use of the CIQ, how might the tool be better worded to encourage productive student reflection?" and "What common *stasis* points do students identify when they reflect on their learning in the weekly CIQ?" This research was conducted within the context of a longitudinal, cross-institutional study of reflective practices in writing courses. Responses indicated a tendency to report challenges related to the pedagogical approaches of the class more than challenges concerning the understanding of course content. The study yields insights into the use of the CIQ itself, as well as into the kinds of "critical incidents" students considered most noteworthy.

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### Introduction

What do "teachable moments" look like to students? This study is a step toward better capturing student perceptions, responding to them, and using that data to generate a more sensitive understanding of how our students and we can become more masterful practitioners of learning. The scope of this article is limited to our use of Brookfield's (1995) formative assessment tool, the "Critical Incident Questionnaire" (CIQ, see Figure 1) to gather weekly observations from our students, which we later codified and analyzed to determine what kinds of conditions or events seem to pose the most formidable barriers to their learning. Our goal in this study is to offer readers a new perspective on an existing tool, testing and adapting that tool to move students closer to self-reflexivity, and to start to understand what kinds of things stand out in their minds as obstacles and tensions in a classroom environment. We believe our use of the CIQ over time and across institutions

can provide readers insights into the tool itself, formative assessment's role in teaching and learning in general, and student perceptions of pedagogy. With the additional knowledge about student perception, teachers can develop methods of reducing tension where it is not productive and helping students to see when it is productive and support their working through it.

We began this study by acknowledging that no matter how transparent our pedagogies or how open our classroom dialogue, we will inevitably perceive classroom experiences differently than our students do. We soon recognized that part of the fuzziness of "learning process" discussions comes from the great variety of factors involved in learning itself. The material and conceptual experiences of learning are different for each learner, and in many ways unique to each discipline. So how do we ever talk about it productively, and how do we intervene in ways that are timely and meaningful to our students? The CIQ gave us a record of concrete descriptions, in our students' own words, with which we could begin our conversation. We paid special attention to students' descriptions of incidents where they appeared to be temporarily stalled or paused in the learning experience as the result of some obstacle or disconnection. We call these incidents "*stasis points*" for reasons we will explain later in this essay.

Our larger purpose for adopting and adapting the CIQ is to help our students and ourselves become more critically reflective practitioners of writing. Therefore, we are concerned not only with obstacles but also with opportunities: in other words, we surely do want to know when something has become a nuisance to our students (such as a broken link on our course home page, or an inconvenient meeting location for a team's project) but we are especially interested in helping our students with the complex problem-solving that arises during the learning process, such as their ability to integrate a rhetorical strategy into their writing, or to synthesize their experience in a homeless shelter with their analysis of a public policy debate. While no tool, including the CIQ, can magically transform students into critical problem solvers, the CIQ seems to support students' moves toward reflexivity, as it creates a habit of looking back at learning and provides leaping-off points for other assignments such as portfolios that deepen the reflection. It also provides us with regular reflection on our teaching; *our* self-reflection is equally important to improving teaching and learning in our classes.

### **Using and Adapting the Critical Incident Questionnaire**

Because Brookfield's tool has been widely adopted by teachers, we begin this essay with a brief overview of the tool itself and an explanation of how and why we have adapted it for our teaching and research. In a later section, we will share sample data from our courses to illustrate how the CIQ can potentially yield multiple layers of understanding for teacher-researchers interested in employing the tool for pedagogical inquiry and for cultivating critically reflective practice. Brookfield describes the CIQ as a way to "embed [our] teaching in accurate information about students' learning" (1995, p. 114). Students respond anonymously to a questionnaire distributed during the last class meeting of each week. They are given approximately 5 to 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire, which consists of two identical pages separated by carbon paper, enabling the students to retain a copy of their own responses. Brookfield's model contains the following five questions.

**Figure 1.** Brookfield's CIQ Questions

- (1) At what moment in the class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
- (2) At what moment in the class this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening?
- (3) What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most affirming and helpful?
- (4) What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?
- (5) What about the class this week surprised you the most? (This could be something about your own reactions to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that occurs to you.)

Brookfield (1995) suggests the primary benefits of using the CIQ are to "alert us to problems before a disaster develops" (pp. 118-119), "encourage students to be reflective learners" (pp. 119-20), "build a case for diversity in teaching" (pp. 120-21)—and by diversity he means a range of teaching approaches, "build trust" (pp. 121-22), and "suggest possibilities for teacher development" (p. 122). We have found all of these benefits in our own use of the CIQ.

In 2006 we began using this method in our own classes at University X and at University Y, which ranged from first-semester composition to upper division rhetorical criticism and research methods. Capturing CIQ data from a fairly broad range of courses (rather than, for example, using a pool of first-year courses at a single institution) has enabled us to track the use of the tool itself, especially as students used it to report their own problem-solving experiences. In the process, we believe we have refined its use and made it a better tool for supporting and enhancing student learning.

Over time we modified the wording of the CIQ questions to encourage students to monitor their intellectual work as well as their overall engagement with the class. Although we share Brookfield's commitment to attending to the "emotional tenor" of our courses (1995, p. 114), we became concerned when we observed that students at both institutions often responded to all five of the original questions in terms of their emotional experiences of the class—possibly taking their cue from the "how did you feel" wording of the first two questions. We also found they repeated answers across questions, which suggested to us that the questions were not sufficiently differentiated in the original form.

Our students often responded to the "what surprised you" question (number 5) with a repetition of their responses to one or more of the questions regarding their feelings, whether engaged, disengaged, or affirmed. For example, one student wrote as a response to question 1 that she or he felt most engaged during "today's discussion on *Phaedrus*" (one of Plato's classical Greek dialogues, Trans. 1993) then wrote in question 5 that she or he was most surprised that, "I am understanding *Phaedrus* better than I thought." While this response is a nice affirmation that the discussion contributed to the student's learning, the student's choice of wording implies that the most "surprising" outcome of the discussion was not a specific piece of knowledge, nor an insight into the process of knowledge building, but rather a feeling of relief about having acquired some knowledge. This is valuable information, but not specifically helpful as a moment of reflection on any personal or

intellectual insights the student derived from the discussion about *Phaedrus*. The form would be improved not only by marking intellectual engagement, but also by encouraging it.

After experimenting with the CIQ wording over several weeks, we opted to include two questions that more explicitly direct students to reflect on course content—such as information discussed in class and materials studied or encountered for our or even other courses (see Figure 2). This change was rooted in a desire to enhance student learning, since reflection is tied to making new information one's own.

Additionally, as we reflected on our disappointment with the question 5 responses, we agreed that what we were *hoping* to see were responses about *surprising connections* students might be making between the work of our class and other classes. Rather than continue to hope that we might elicit such information from a more generally worded question, we revised that final question into one that explicitly seeks *connections*.

Does asking for connections train students to give us connections-oriented responses? Sure it does. And this is the moment when the CIQ became a better teaching tool for us. Realistically, any good formative assessment tool “forms” as well as “assesses.” Brookfield's original CIQ is intended to promote critical reflection, but its questions guide students to concentrate almost exclusively on classroom dynamics. Our revision to the CIQ is an effort to encourage students to approach reflection as something that takes into account a wider array of factors, including concepts, materials, and sources of learning beyond the classroom.

**Figure 2.** Our Revised CIQ Questions

- (1) At what moment in class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
- (2) At what moment in class this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening?
- (3) What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most affirming and helpful?
- (4) What material you read, gathered for a project, or discussed in class this week engaged your thinking most? How did it engage you?
- (5) Which concept covered in class or in the reading for this week did you find most puzzling or confusing? What was puzzling about it?
- (6) What connection did you make between the material you read, gathered for a project, or discussed in class this week and other material in the class or in other classes?

These modifications yielded more and different kinds of responses and encouraged more precise explanations regarding students' experiences of class content. For instance, in one class, question 5 led multiple students to indicate they did not yet feel comfortable with fantasy-theme criticism and the concept of symbolic convergence when it was first introduced. Question 6 made possible answers such as:

*"I'm seeing though all of these [theories] genre criticism, etc. how to help myself with literary analysis papers"*

*"Symbolic convergence connects up w/my study of the meaning humans place on the environment they inhabit."*

Although we are still searching for ways to further facilitate in-depth responses from students, the data now collected is more useful for our efforts to distill "critical incidents" into actionable pedagogical information. We find, on a week-to-week basis, the adjusted tool has helped focus students more on their knowledge-making, which means we know better what they know and can respond to the gaps in that understanding and build on the foundations they report.

### **Analyzing CIQ Responses: Finding "Stasis Points" for Intervention**

When a student reports that something important happened in a class, whether positive or negative, it catches our attention as something that made a difference in the learning process. Perhaps not in the ways we intended. But certainly in ways we may want to replicate or amplify or otherwise address. In short, we want to take advantage of that significant moment.

As rhetoricians—researchers and teachers trained to analyze the way words help and hinder human activities—we see a real kinship between the *critical incident* and the Aristotelian concept of *stasis*: a *stopping point* at which important questions must be clarified before an argument can commence (Aristotle, trans. 1991; Carter, 1988; Dieter, 1994; Kennedy, 1999; Nadeau, 1959). In the classroom, such stopping points arise when some obstacle blocks a student from making progress as a learner: the unclear assignment, the overbearing team member, the unfamiliar terminology in a scholarly article. A *stasis* incident may also be more of a pause than a true stop: a moment of productive tension between a student and a new idea, an alternative point of view. These are moments when a learner stops to re-frame her original problem or to reconsider it from a fresh perspective.

In any event, our ability to respond to such moments depends on (1) knowing that an incident occurred, (2) knowing how the student perceived the incident so we can discuss it and/or respond to it in ways that make sense to us both, and (3) having the pedagogical tools and knowledge of our field to respond when the *stasis* occurs.

As a stand-alone, weekly tool the CIQ may do enough by simply helping us capture those moments for immediate response. But such moments arise within a larger teaching context, one that we need to understand more fully. To get a clearer sense of how our own teaching habits and tactics—and our students' habits and tactics as learners—may contribute to those *stasis* incidents, we believe it is important to trace the larger patterns of the class responses and to have a way to clarify and discuss those patterns during the semester. For this reason we returned to Schön's <<http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-Schön.htm>> categories of problem-solving which, in an earlier study, helped us categorize the *stasis* incidents experienced by teachers (Rupiper Taggart and Hessler, 2006).

In *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, Schön identifies six constants to be mastered within any field of professional work: "medium, language, repertoire, appreciative system, overarching theory, and role frames" (1983, p. 273). In a sense, our decision to use Schön is an attempt to "reverse-engineer" reflective practice: whereas Schön's categories describe the critical mindsets of seasoned professionals, we are applying those categories to cultivate critical mindsets among novice writers. Because we periodically discuss our research with our students, we have translated some of Schön's terms into more accessible language. Our versions of Schön's six categories are defined in

the following table (Table 1). After working with the data, we established two additional categories: readiness and not enough information (for not codifiable comments). The readiness category fills a gap: because we are observing the work of novices rather than seasoned professionals, the responses we read on the CIQs naturally include students reporting that their own sense of unpreparedness is contributing to the *stasis*.

**Table 1.** *Stasis* Problem-Solving Categories

Category	Definition	Response Characteristics	Sample Student Responses
<b>Materials (MAT)</b> Schön's term: "medium"	Resources we use to accomplish tasks	Anything tangible that limits or facilitates work (e.g., assignment sheets, meeting times, computers, classroom spaces, deadlines)  Physical wellness or sickness	"I couldn't download the syllabus from our course site."  "I was too sleepy to pay attention."
<b>Naming (NAM)</b> Schön's term: "language"	How we name and explain what we do, including oral and written language, gestures, and other forms of symbolic communication, as well as the texts or stories that influence our situation	Any problems or conflicts that arise from word choice  Debates about appropriateness of language for a situation  Misunderstanding basic definitions of class concepts  When using different names for the same thing leads to tension, conflict, or misunderstanding	"When the concept of controlling idea was explained, the explanation left me confused."
<b>Approaches (APP)</b> Schön's term: "repertoire"	Typical routines and methods for enacting work	Working from models or case studies  Pedagogical methods (individual vs. group work, whole class discussions, etc.)  Students' own methods/proclivities for working  Understanding or not understanding the task at hand	"I got bored pretty quickly with filling out the chart. Would have been good to go through it quickly rather than spend the whole period on it."
<b>Values and Standards (VAL)</b> Schön's term: "appreciative systems"	Problem-solving infrastructure that includes values and standards, largely emerging from sociocultural influences as well as academic and professional training.	Disciplinary differences emerging as values (e.g., trust in a laboratory experiment vs. eye-witness testimony as evidence of truth)  When one value system	"During the Whole Class Workshop, I was not sure of the standard expected for peer feedback."  "In class workshop. I feel like I have a different overall opinion on writing and what



	Beliefs and value systems that are employed to evaluate situations and information	seems to come into conflict with another. Student values conflicting with our values or with other students' values. (When a student values product over process, for instance, while we may value the opposite.)	<i>makes a good review."</i>  <i>"At certain points in the videos I didn't necessarily agree with what they were saying."</i>
		When a value seems to blind an individual to an alternative	
		When standards come into conflict in grading and evaluating work	
<b>Theory (THE)</b> <b>Schön's term: "overarching theory"</b>	Understanding through metalanguage and/or by viewing a situation through a theoretical lens	Misapplications of theory (trying to predict something that can't be predicted by the theory, for instance)  Resistance to a theory or to theory-in-general (e.g., the belief that studying theory is irrelevant to everyday life)  Misunderstandings about theory	<i>"When discussing fantasy-theme analysis. My comprehension of the text was poor; my participation in class was poor."</i>
<b>Roles (ROL)</b> <b>Schön's term: "role frames"</b>	Self-defined roles adopted during the work of a practitioner	An individual's sense of her position in relation to others; self-concept about her role in the classroom, group, society, etc.	<i>"Sometimes it is easy to feel left out because a lot of people had class together before or have had a class with [you] before."</i>
<b>Readiness (REA)</b>	Existing knowledge, training, skills, and experiences that make our classes feel familiar or feasible	An individual's belief that she does not know what to do next and a lack of confidence or willingness to experimentally move forward  Often a key piece of information needed to decode is simply missing.	<i>"Ideological worksheet. I didn't know the second cartoon was Ted Kennedy."</i>  <i>"Working out genre on Facebook is challenging for me because I don't use it."</i>
<b>Not enough information (NEI)</b>	The response lacks sufficient detail for coding or categorization		<i>"I was least engaged during the discussion."</i>

Using the adapted Schönian categories in Table 1, we were able to code virtually all responses.

### Working with the Data: A Sample Analysis

In this section, we offer preliminary results of our longitudinal study of student *stasis* points to reveal the kinds of information available through use of the CIQ. We suggest that the CIQ offers us several layers of understanding and interaction for pedagogical purposes:

- **Student self-reflection.** The student uses the CIQ to record what and how she has learned in a given week; later in the semester, she reviews her collected responses to reflect on her dispositions, experiences, and growth as a learner.
- **Teacher weekly reflection and response.** The teacher regularly completes a CIQ alongside the students and reviews each batch of CIQs to craft the upcoming week's teaching.
- **Week-to-week patterns.** We can step back from the responses to see patterns from week to week (focusing not just on what students have reported this week, but on what seems to be shifting and changing from previous weeks) to determine whether our interventions have been successful.
- **Course patterns across semesters.** As teacher-researchers, we can observe common student responses regarding the same course over multiple semesters, helping us note how changes in the course affect student responses.
- **Cross-course, cross-semester insights.** We can look comparatively at our data to understand common patterns in courses in general related to student frustration and engagement.

The first two layers are detailed in Brookfield's (1995) introduction to the CIQ and summarized in the "Using and Adapting" section above; therefore, we will not discuss them in depth here. It is at the broader level of patterns that we focus our attention in the present study. The cross-course, cross-semester insights may help SoTL readers in a range of disciplines to reflect on their own longer-term teaching and learning dynamics, to think strategically about the ebb and flow of confusion and relief in their own courses, and to explain those typical patterns to students in ways that may help them develop patience for complexity. Our adapted form, because it provides us with more clearly content-focused information, continues to provide insight into students' emotional responses but also helps us to pinpoint which portions of the content are most jarring, potentially productive, and even impenetrable for students.

To demonstrate the kinds of patterns that have emerged from this research, we will summarize our interpretation of codified data derived from Spring and Fall 2007 at University X and from Fall 2007 and Spring 2008 at University Y. For this analysis, we focus on the two CIQ questions where *stasis* or stopping points are most likely to emerge. These questions are "At what moment in class this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening?" and "Which concept covered in class or in the reading for this week did you find most puzzling or confusing?"

### Course Patterns Across Semesters

To show how the CIQ can highlight course patterns from semester to semester, we provide an example from the Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences course. In this class,

theory was the most frequent *stasis* (see Table 2). Rupiper Taggart anticipated this type of CIQ response because theory is the most challenging content and makes up a large portion of the course. Students are introduced to a number of theoretical lenses for analyzing rhetoric and must ultimately choose one lens with which to analyze a popular culture artifact. What the CIQ does, then, is help the teacher see how many students are struggling with the new theory and how long they struggle with it; in a given class, the introduction and early application of a theory might move quickly or we might need to slow down and add models and practice in response to the students' sense that the theory is still opaque to them. Eventually, when Rupiper Taggart reinforced a theory with a range of activities, it disappeared from the CIQs or she started to see responses to other questions on the form indicating, for example:

*"Now I get generic criticism." [Generic criticism examines genre form and function, among other issues.]*

*"The ideological worksheet helped me understand how to apply the theory."*

Also, the first time theory is introduced, Rupiper Taggart typically sees a spike in "I don't understand x theory." The CIQ provides a reminder each time, each semester, to say, "Give yourselves a chance. Theory is hard. It'll sink in, and you only have to choose one lens in the end that you think will help you conduct your own research." This reassurance plays an important role in making sure that initial confusion does not rule the day.

**Table 2.** Semester data, *stasis* responses to the question: "Which concept covered in class or in the reading for this week did you find most puzzling or confusing? What was puzzling about it?"

Course Title, Semester	Stasis Categories							
	MAT	APP	THE	NAM	VAL	ROL	REA	NEI
Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Spring 2007	13	20	16	17	1	1	7	3
Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Fall 2007	13	33	55	19	7	3	7	7
Honors Composition I, Fall 2007	8	25	0	4	5	4	0	1
Honors Composition II, Spring 2008	1	30	0	16	5	2	2	5
<i>Total</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>108</i>	<i>71</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>16</i>

### Course Patterns: Week to Week

Across the semester, week to week, the dominant *stasis* tends to shift in response to what is happening in class. The following two charts from University X (Tables 3 and 4) illustrate this pattern. In the spring of 2007, you can see that the first week, which involved definitions, showed a spike in student responses indicating their most puzzling experiences related to naming and defining terms along with the language we were going to use in the course. In that first week, Rupiper Taggart introduced the terms rhetoric and criticism, working from the students' prior knowledge and toward a shared course definition. As a result, week one comments tended to be like these:

*The definition of rhetoric still seems like I'm not quite grasping it. It is just a new concept.*

*The first day we defined terms and for me that was confusing because I was unfamiliar with some.*

We see this as a good sign, that the course will give them new knowledge. The following fall, *Naming* similarly emerged quickly as the thing that was puzzling. In this semester, Rupiper Taggart moved students more quickly into the notion of a controlling idea, yet the confusion was still around core course terms and concepts:

*The concept of controlling ideas is still somewhat fuzzy to me. I just don't know exactly what is wanted or expected.*

In a typical semester in this course, the occurrence of confusion and distancing overall diminishes toward the end of the semester, when classroom routines have been established, major concepts introduced and reinforced. The dynamic of the semester is that students feel disoriented and challenged most in the first half of the course and they feel relatively in control of the content and tasks by the end. Recognizing the typical cycle helps Rupiper Taggart explain to students what they might be feeling and how the course will progress if they are engaged with it. It is important to note that while responses about challenges or obstacles slow toward the end of a semester, overall student responses remain relatively constant in number and quality. If time is allotted to the CIQ, students will write something.

**Table 3.** Weekly data, *stasis* responses to the question: "Which concept covered in class or in the reading for this week did you find most puzzling or confusing? What was puzzling about it?"

<b>Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Spring 2007</b>		<b>Stasis Categories</b>						
Weekly CIQ Date	MAT	APP	THE	NAM	VAL	ROL	REA	NEI
Jan 11	0	1	4	<b>9</b>	0	0	1	0
Jan 18	1	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	1	0	0	1	0
Jan 25	1	<b>4</b>	3	1	0	0	2	0
Feb 1	0	<b>2</b>	1	1	0	1	0	0
Mar 8	2	<b>3</b>	2	0	0	0	1	1
Mar 29	1	<b>2</b>	0	<b>2</b>	0	0	0	1
Apr 5	1	<b>4</b>	1	1	0	0	0	0
Apr 12	<b>2</b>	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Apr 19	<b>2</b>	0	1	1	0	0	0	0
Apr 27	<b>2</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
May 3	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
<i>Total</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>3</i>

  

<b>Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Fall 2007</b>		<b>Stasis Categories</b>						
Weekly CIQ Date	MAT	APP	THE	NAM	VAL	ROL	REA	NEI
Aug 30	3	3	1	<b>9</b>	0	0	1	2
Sept 11	2	2	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	0	0	0	0
Sept 13	0	3	<b>8</b>	3	0	0	0	0
Sept 27	0	1	<b>8</b>	2	0	0	1	0

Oct 4	1	2	<b>10</b>	1	0	1	0	0
Oct 11	0	4	<b>8</b>	0	0	0	1	0
Oct 18	2	<b>4</b>	2	1	2	1	0	0
Oct 24	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	0	0	2	0	1	1
Nov 1	0	2	2	2	1	0	1	1
Nov 8	0	2	0	1	1	0	2	2
Nov 15	0	<b>4</b>	1	0	1	0	0	1
Nov 29	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0
<i>Total</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>33</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>7</i>

**Table 4.** Weekly data, *stasis* responses to the question: "At what moment in class this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening?"

<b>Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Spring 2007</b>		<b>Stasis Categories</b>						
Weekly CIQ Date	MAT	APP	THE	NAM	VAL	ROL	REA	NEI
Jan 11	2	<b>8</b>	1	0	1	0	0	2
Jan 18	0	<b>6</b>	0	1	0	1	1	2
Jan 25	<b>4</b>	3	3	0	0	1	0	1
Feb 1	2	1	0	0	0	2	0	0
Mar 8	1	<b>3</b>	2	1	2	1	0	1
Mar 29	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	1	0	2	2	0	0
Apr 5	3	<b>5</b>	1	2	0	1	0	0
Apr 12	2	1	0	1	0	<b>4</b>	0	0
Apr 19	<b>3</b>	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Apr 27	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	2
May 3	2	<b>5</b>	0	0	0	1	0	0
<i>Total</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>8</i>

  

<b>Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Fall 2007</b>		<b>Stasis Categories</b>						
Weekly CIQ Date	MAT	APP	THE	NAM	VAL	ROL	REA	NEI
Aug 30	3	2	<b>4</b>	2	1	1	1	2
Sept 11	0	<b>5</b>	1	0	0	0	1	3
Sept 13	1	1	<b>4</b>	0	0	1	1	2
Sept 27	0	1	<b>8</b>	0	1	0	0	2
Oct 4	1	3	<b>6</b>	0	1	0	1	1
Oct 11	0	2	<b>9</b>	0	1	0	0	2
Oct 18	0	0	3	0	3	3	1	1
Oct 24	1	<b>7</b>	0	0	2	1	0	1
Nov 1	1	<b>5</b>	2	0	3	1	2	1
Nov 8	2	<b>3</b>	1	0	1	1	6	1
Nov 15	2	<b>4</b>	0	0	3	0	2	1
Nov 29	0	<b>3</b>	1	1	1	1	2	4
<i>Total</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>21</i>

### Stasis Patterns: Cross-institution, Cross-course

Beyond helping us envision our own courses, however, our pilot data suggest one major finding regarding what students perceive to be the major obstacle to their learning, regardless of the institution or course: the *stasis* of *Approach*. In Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences, the most common *stasis* the students report is *Approaches*, with 127 occurrences over two semesters in response to the two questions (see Tables 2 and 5). *Theory* runs a close race for second with 118 total occurrences and *Materials* is a distant third at 61 occurrences. Similarly, for Hessler's composition courses, the most commonly occurring *stasis* point is *Approaches*, at 125 occurrences over two semesters in response to the two questions. *Materials* comes in a very distant second at 36 occurrences. From these four sections of students, we can see that students *believe* or self-report that the activities of the class (and their own approaches to completing them) are the source of their confusion and feeling of distance or disconnectedness, as shown in the following responses from both institutions, regarding when the students felt distanced:

*Sometimes when we were called upon in class to try to give a specific answer that I didn't know much about.*

*Probably while we were trying to figure out everyone's schedule [for the group research project].*

*I was very distanced & frustrated by the domains of knowledge assignment. I felt that I was being treated like I was in English 110 & was writing my first research paper. The information in the handout was valuable; the assignment superfluous.*

The first student notes that it was being called upon in class, an *Approach*, that was distancing, rather than the material about which the student felt he or she knew little. The second is commenting on an in-class task for coordinating a team project. The third feels insulted by being asked to document her or his research path in a take-home assignment, viewing the written portion of the homework to be unimportant.

**Table 5.** Semester data, *stasis* responses to the question: "At what moment in class this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening?"

Course Title, Semester	Stasis Categories							
	MAT	APP	THE	NAM	VAL	ROL	REA	NEI
Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Spring 2007	24	38	8	5	5	15	1	8
Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Fall 2007	11	36	39	3	17	9	17	21
Honors Comp I, Fall 2007	16	24	0	0	1	12	0	2
Honors Comp II, Spring 2008	11	46	0	4	0	1	4	21
<i>Total</i>	<i>62</i>	<i>144</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>52</i>

What do we make of this finding? To begin to explain the frequency of the *Approaches* responses across sections, it is worth noting here that writing must be learned through

demonstration, application, and practice; one cannot learn to write through lecture. The diverse strategies for supporting and developing writers might account for students' focus on approaches in part.

The *Approach*-orientation of their responses may also be rooted in convenience. It is convenient to use the labels used in the class itself. When we prepare to respond to the CIQ, we often list or review the things we did that week in class, and it is those labels that reappear in the student's responses:

*the Mickey Mouse Monopoly video*

*the whole class workshop*

*the review genre table*

Where new and old knowledge and experience conflict, the source of the discomfort can seem inexplicable or rooted in the moment. We interpret some of the *Approaches* responses to be of this nature, the kind of "disorienting dilemma" that simply feels wrong to the student (Mezirow 1981, pp. 7-8, 1991). Rarely do they recognize or acknowledge what might underlie their feeling of discomfort: it is not just because we have all these activities that they say something like "peer critique" in response to what has distanced them during the week. A lot happens during each peer critique that is not the same from instance to instance. Perhaps the genre the students are composing is new, so the student does not feel familiar enough with the rhetorical constraints of the new task to respond to a peer. Perhaps a student is intimidated by the personality of her peer-reviewer. Or perhaps the back of the room is noisy, preventing her from being focused or productive during the in-class peer response time.

Since the CIQ process is designed to promote dialogue with students, the solution to a *stasis* of *Approach* may seem as straightforward as changing our teaching methods or as simple as making our methods as explicit and transparent as possible. Of course, either intervention can be complicated, especially in the middle of a course underway. While most good teachers will, at some point, solicit student feedback on a class activity, such discussions fall under the Law of Diminishing Returns. Focusing too much class time on the pedagogical underpinnings of a course, or even on the step-by-step tasks of an assignment, can frustrate and distract students. Indeed, in Hessler's case, quite often the students' *Approach*-related concerns are about the coordination of the learning process, not about problems with the learning process itself. Because most of her classes involve a service-learning component, she and her students spend considerable time managing the logistics and technicalities of off-campus research and writing experiences.

The CIQ offers a view to the kinds of *Approach*-related challenges that are arising in a course, helping a teacher detect which ones require assignment modifications or further in-class explanations, and which can be clarified through activities or discussions embedded into upcoming class meetings.

### **"Stalling" or Stretching? Interpreting and Managing Pedagogical Feedback**

As we analyzed the *Approach*-related responses, we found they fell into two basic categories: procedural concerns and pedagogical concerns. *Procedural* concerns express

confusion or disengagement that students experience as they attempt to complete a specific, assigned task. When students become stalled as a result of a procedural concern, it can be fairly simple to intervene: in the short term, we can clarify the wording on an assignment sheet or provide more in-class activities to ensure everyone knows what to do and why we are doing it; for the longer term, we can record the intervention in our teaching journals and build a stronger assignment for future courses.

*Pedagogical* concerns are those that arise from class activities or discussions that we, as teachers, deliberately integrated into the class experience but that students may not recognize as an intentional learning activity. Granted, this is a tricky distinction to make, but it is important to note that—especially in workshop- or discussion-oriented classes—the teacher's pedagogy may not be detectable as such to the students. Our formal assignments are clear because they are printed, distributed, and graded. Our over-arching pedagogy, though, encompasses everything from seating arrangements to a philosophical commitment to experiential learning to a decision to include spontaneously selected YouTube videos to enrich a class discussion. For these reasons, it is helpful to tag our students' responses soon after they complete the CIQs, while the class experience is still fresh in our minds. The pedagogical approaches noted within the CIQs are as diverse as the teachers, students, and methods encountered in each class. Nonetheless, we would like to share just one sample to illustrate this level of response and our basic method of interpreting and managing it.

On March 6, 2008, approximately half of Hessler's students reported feeling engaged or intrigued by a pair of video clips viewed during class, but the other half reported feeling distanced and/or puzzled by the videos. Below are a few sample responses from the distanced/puzzled categories:

*"I felt distanced at the beginning of [Powaqqatsi]. But once I watched it for a while I liked it."*

*"Watching [Powaqqatsi]."*

*"The videos with the weird music."*

*"Communicating through music and image."*

*"[Koyaanisqatsi] confused me."*

As you can see, student CIQ responses are often quite short and rarely contextualized. Hessler tagged each of these responses as *Approach* because they arose from her pedagogical method. She decided to screen the video excerpts during a class discussion when a student said the video they had viewed as homework, Blue Man Group's *Exhibit 13* <<http://www.exhibit13.com/>>, reminded him of the film *Koyaanisqatsi*. The class had spent the academic year developing digital museum exhibits for the Oklahoma City National Memorial Center and Museum, so the shift from their multimedia writing project (a public memory project regarding the April 19, 1995 bombing) to *Exhibit 13* (a public memory project regarding the September 11, 2001 bombing) was relatively intuitive. The further leap from *Exhibit 13* to film clips from *Koyaanisqatsi* and *Powaqqatsi* was disorienting for some students. The films are photography- and music-driven social commentaries on a world out of balance, a theme that lent itself to the class's discussion about public memory and the conditions that foster terrorism.



Despite their brevity, the CIQ responses offer clues into what "distanced" and "puzzled" mean to the students. For some, a report of being puzzled may not mean that their learning was halted but that they encountered something "weird" or unexpected that needed resolution before they could move forward. For the first student, distancing was an initial reaction that evolved into some degree of engagement. For the third and perhaps also the fourth student, the puzzlement was over what was happening on the screen, and perhaps how it was being done. For the second student, we must speculate as best we can—but his or her emphasis on "watching" the video implies that perhaps it was the passiveness of the activity that created the distance—the darkened room and haunting soundtrack could certainly lull a viewer into a state of low-energy and low-engagement.

The following week, Hessler discussed the responses with the class. None of the CIQs had omitted mention of the videos—all included some report of engagement or confusion (or both)—so this was a ripe topic for further discussion. Several students confirmed that they were not sure exactly why they were watching the films at first, and that the minimalist music and lack of dialogue challenged their powers of concentration. This feedback reminded Hessler to continue refining her use of associative learning strategies in the classroom—an improvisational approach that demands practice and pedagogical scaffolding. The CIQ responses gave Hessler the opportunity to re-visit the class's encounter with the videos *as a learning experience*, over and above their relevance to the course content. Asking the students, as a group, to clarify the vaguer responses (which remained anonymous) helped everyone reflect on what they were doing during the video-watching, how it felt, and what it meant. For teachers hoping to guide students through such disorienting dilemmas, the CIQ offers a means of staying in tune with students as they experience unfamiliar or uncomfortable material so it can be reframed later in ways that will encourage them to keep stretching for insights.

### **Conclusion: Balancing Teacher Responsiveness and Learner Responsibility**

Though we have derived many benefits from the CIQ, we must also acknowledge the form's limitations. First, its static questions can lead to student boredom over the course of a semester. We have mitigated that problem in small ways by occasionally asking students to answer just one of the questions more completely than usual; skipping a week when time ran out or when it felt like we might need a break; and having them combine two weeks' worth of responses when, for example, one of those weeks involved individual conferring or field work outside class. Second, the nature of the questions still directs students to respond in terms of felt experiences rather than issues or concepts (though we have balanced this somewhat through our CIQ revisions). Third, the brief time generally allotted for in-class response results in short, sometimes cryptic, answers, more like a blurry snapshot than a complete and crystal clear image of the week.

Yet even given these constraints, we agree with Brookfield that the CIQ can be "a quick and revealing way to ascertain the effects your actions are having on students" (1995, p. 114) as well as a concrete tool for opening up dialogue between teacher and student. In fact, Rupiper Taggart has seen this effect not only in her own classrooms, but, because she trains new teachers, she has seen clear positive effects on their teaching as they use the CIQ to understand class dynamics and develop professionally as teachers. The great sense of relief most of them feel the first time they read through CIQ responses allows them to relax into the role and thereby become better teachers more quickly.

This weekly (or periodic) routine also starts to build the habits of mind for reflection-in-action: a condition of active engagement during learning and other forms of creative work

(Schön, 1990; Yancey, 1998, p. 13). To take the time each week and make it a priority to consider one's own response to reading, writing, discussion, and lecture is to begin to build the habits of the reflective practitioner. We start to see evidence of the habits built by the CIQ in students' reflective portfolio cover letters, in which they are asked to reflect on and learn from their CIQ responses:

*Reflecting on my CIQs, I appreciate hearing feedback about other people's rhetorical criticism papers. By analyzing others' work and knowing what they need to do to improve, I can then draw connections between my rhetorical criticism paper [SIC] and improve my own work. Some concerns that have specifically been addressed through Whole Class Workshops are how much artifact summary to include, what should a methods section look like and how to incorporate outside sources.*

Without the regularity of the reflection and the trail left by the CIQ, students might not be able to as explicitly articulate what they have been doing to learn a new type of writing, for instance. That conscious knowledge can translate into strategies for writing in new contexts for new audiences and purposes.

Furthermore, viewing student responses through the lens of our Schönian reflective practitioner's categories helps us to understand the nature of our students' confusion and orientation toward our courses and their content. The most basic benefit of the Schönian categories is that they give us a way to talk about the kinds of patterns we find in the students' responses. We can see where they've gotten stuck or feel they have and help them move forward. And we can more concretely encourage them to trace their own patterns and reflect on their habits of mind within moments of flow and stoppage. It has become even clearer through our analysis of student *stasis* patterns that moments of confusion, disorientation, or stalling, like *stasis* points in an argument, need not be permanent obstacles to learning and often represent the kinds of positive disorientation that can lead to expanded understanding. What's stalling student learning, then, might be their perception that the way we're teaching, the activities they've completed, or even the texts they've encountered are "distancing" or "puzzling"—but that perception may not be the best rationale for abandoning the things about which they complain.

Another trend made visible by the CIQ is that students do not habitually reflect on their own approaches to completing tasks and solving problems. Rather, they talk about their experience of the class in terms of what happened *to* them rather than *by* them. Schön suggests we use a range of approaches to solve problems. If the problem from the students' perspective is the *approach* taken to learning the material, and if that approach is perceived as mainly the responsibility of someone else (i.e., the teacher), then students may not recognize the need to strengthen their own problem-solving skills; instead, they may deflect initiative back to the teacher. At this point, a responsive teacher may "solve" the problem by quickly modifying the task and in doing so remove a problem-solving opportunity for her students. If the CIQ is perceived by students and teachers mainly as a way for students to provide feedback on the course, it might inadvertently reinforce passive learning rather than active learning by students and undermine a teacher's best efforts to be a "guide on the side" rather than a "sage on a stage."

If one of our aims in using the CIQ is to help learners cultivate a sense of their own agency, we must be sure that students use this tool as a mirror for scrutinizing their *actions* as well as their experiences. One practical way to encourage this behavior is to include a question that asks students to deliberate upon what action they took in the week that advanced their thinking most. An additional option would be to add an activity to the class that asks

students to examine their distanced and puzzled responses for a course unit and find one way that they can work to reduce their own confusion.

Such activities challenge us as teachers to be better mentors for students during the problem-solving process. Promptly intervening in an activity—changing an assignment or removing an obstacle—can be more expedient for us than patiently coaching students through an unanticipated problem. Being a better mentor also means taking the CIQ seriously as a mirror of our own teaching and learning processes. As our students complete their forms, we must do the same, and share our self-reflections when we discuss the student responses during class time.

Ultimately, the CIQ gives us a way to track not only our students' "critical incidents" but also our own pedagogical patterns and perceptions. Critical reflection is a discipline. The CIQ enables us to make critically reflective learning visible to ourselves and to our students.

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